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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [KMPI](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL](#) [RIGHTS](#)
SUBJECT: ACTIVISTS LAUD WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACCOMPLISHMENTS;
STRESS EDUCATION AND TRAINING AS BASIS FOR FUTURE PROGRESS

REF: A. KUWAIT 3178

[B](#). KUWAIT 2931

[C](#). KUWAIT 2091

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The Charge hosted on July 19 a tea for the three delegations of Kuwaiti women who traveled in early July to the U.S., the UK, and France to talk about women's rights (ref b). Other attendees included political activists, Members of Parliament, journalists, and members of the diplomatic community. The euphoria over the May 16 decision granting women full political rights and the subsequent appointment of a female minister and two Municipal Council members remains, but there is a growing realization that much still needs to be done to prepare women to exercise their rights. Most talked about the need for a broad voter education campaign during the run-up to the 2007 parliamentary elections and the immediate need to prepare women to take part in the February 2006 voter registration. End summary.

Education the Key to Women's Political Participation

[1](#)2. (U) Twenty-five Kuwaitis, including seven women delegates from the Ministry of Information-sponsored tour on women's rights to London, Paris, and Washington, and 10 representatives of the diplomatic community attended the Charge's tea on July 19. The event was an opportunity for advocates of women's rights, representing groups and organizations which rarely interact with each other, to discuss recent political changes and how to sustain the reform efforts.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Dr. Abdullah Sahar, a political science professor at Kuwait University, talked about the need for civic education for Kuwaiti women, whom he said had a 40-year disadvantage to overcome. He told PolChief that he and a few colleagues were developing a curriculum on campaigning, including how to develop a campaign message, which buzz words to use, and how to deal with Kuwait's diwanya culture (ref a). He said he had 25 years of campaign experience, most of which he honed as a student in the U.S., and he was eager to share his knowledge with Kuwaiti women and the next generation of voters. He added that political education efforts needed to be "home-grown," arguing that an outside NGO would be looked at with skepticism, would be accused of interfering in Kuwait's internal affairs, and would never fully understand how Kuwaiti society functions.

[1](#)4. (SBU) When asked how the U.S. could best support women's political participation, Dr. Sahar called for the translation into Arabic of books and pamphlets on democracy and exercising one's rights. He further commented that there was a big gap in the average citizen's understanding of Kuwait's political system. Civics is not taught at the secondary school level and courses offered by Kuwait University are limited in scope because the state-run school does not fully encourage analysis or a critique of the government. (Note: Post's strategy for the Freedom Agenda recommends translation and distribution of the "Journal of Democracy" (ref c). Post welcomes guidance on securing funding for this project that would be well received in Kuwait. Post also welcomes guidance on whether it is still possible to use MEPI small grants funding for some of the activities described by Dr. Sahar. End note.)

[1](#)5. (SBU) Similarly, Khaled Al-Fadallah of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) said the organization had formed a committee, "16-05" (May 16), to oversee voter registration of women and training. In addition, NDA advocates reducing the number of electoral constituencies, a move that could limit vote-buying and facilitate women's participation. He requested U.S. assistance in campaign training, voter registration drives, and candidate training.

Women's Delegation Leaves Washington with a Positive Outlook

[1](#)6. (SBU) Dr. Nibal Al-Boursly, who was part of the delegation that visited Washington, said she was impressed

with the warm reception she received in the U.S. and surprised to discover that "women face the same problems wherever you go." She looked forward to developing professional relationships with the American women she met and commented that Kuwaiti women needed to be more active in Vital Voices. Amal Al-Khalid, a journalist with the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), was also one of the Washington delegation participants and praised the group's visit. She told PolOff that she was happy to portray a different image of Kuwaiti women to her American counterparts, one that broke the stereotype of voiceless, abaya-clad women. Al-Khalid enthusiastically recounted how shock flashed on the faces of some American hosts when they first met the fashion-conscious and Western-oriented Kuwaitis. While the tour received wide media coverage in Kuwait and, to a more limited degree, in the U.S., women cannot rest, she added. She admitted that Kuwaiti society was splintered and that her group represented a small percentage of politically-active women while most females remain apathetic. The women will need to cross religious, class, and geographic lines in order to incorporate the currently marginalized majority of potential female voters, she stated. Al-Khalid welcomed U.S. and international training to prepare activists for voter registration drives, campaign training, and consensus building among women.

Focus on the Future: Encouraging Youth Interest in Politics

17. (SBU) Columnist Muna Al-Fuzai, who earlier in the week was widely criticized for a column in which she wrote that the women's delegations were not representative of the majority of Kuwaiti women. Calling them "Kuwait's aristocracy," she questioned their vision about Kuwait's political future. She welcomed the opportunity to confront her detractors and had several lively discussions on bridging religious and economic differences as women exercised their rights. She explained to her audience that her comments were not personal attacks, rather an effort to raise awareness about Kuwait's large middle class and the fact that many of these women are from conservative families and do not identify with the worldly academics associated with the women's rights struggle. She said following the publication of her column, a group of young Shi'a women -- Al-Fuzai is Sunni -- invited her to speak to them about women's issues and college students have also reached out to her. She told PolChief she found her new target audience and would use her English and Arabic columns, and public speaking appearances, to encourage them to become politically active.

The Islamist Threat

18. (SBU) Kuwait National Petroleum Company Training and Development Manager told PolAsst that Kuwait was split into three categories of women: one group that really supports women's rights and was working hard for them; "the lazy women who don't care and don't want to hear about it (women's rights);" and women who believe the appointment of a female minister and women in Parliament was "the end of the world." She hoped that all three groups could meet to find common ground.

19. (SBU) Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi of Kuwait University also stressed the need for a broad education campaign. She noted her concern that Kuwait's moderates and liberals are not well organized, and commenting on a recent announcement by the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, that it would begin recruiting women, said they would "stop at nothing" to maintain or increase the Islamist presence in Parliament. Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor Assistant Undersecretary Adnan Al-Omar and women's rights activist Bader Mousa Al-Saif echoed Al-Mekaimi's concerns. Al-Omar strongly urged the "three to four" groups within the women's movement to unify to defend their political rights.

10. (SBU) Shamael Al-Sharikh, a member of the Women's Cultural Society and an officer with the Kuwait Petroleum Company, also commented on the Islamists, telling PolOff that the goals of women's rights activists in Kuwait were much different than those of the Islamists -- their key political opposition. She said that for Islamists, political goals were easy to accomplish because of the relative simplicity of their agenda. Unlike Islamist groups, she explained, the women's movement in Kuwait was not a homogenous group and was not as well organized or funded. She stated that political success was more difficult for a women's political agenda in part because of the cultural barriers; however, the greater challenge was due to the fact that the women's movement was comprised of a more diverse group of people, resulting in objectives more sophisticated than anything on the Islamist political agenda. She also commented on the injustice of the bidoon -- stateless Arab -- situation in Kuwait and expressed a concern that the issue needed to be addressed in the future.

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